

Onani Master Kurosawa: After the Juvenile (2007)

ISE Katsura, Yoko

Part One

It was a refreshing morning on my day off. I was heckled by a complaint that came through my cell phone.

“Take me with you-!”

It was such a threatening attitude that I involuntarily pulled the cell phone away from my ear due to Sugawa’s shouting. Her selfish mannerism wasn’t a recent occurrence, but at the very least, she could have seen me off in a more kindly manner on the morning of my departure.

“You tell me to take you with me, but right now, aren’t you running out of money? And besides, I had already planned this trip a long time ago with Takigawa and the rest of them...”

“That’s why I’m unable to take this! Why the hell didn’t you talk to me about something so important!? When did you become so high and mighty that you could secretly run off with your buddies and enjoy a fun trip together, bastard?!”

Sugawa’s anger didn’t show any signs of abating, and even now sounded like the screech from a reverberating microphone. In one way or another, I wanted to calm her down, but if things went on like this, it looked like I was going to be late for our designated assembly time. Right now, it’s about the time I should be leaving my house.

“I’m sorry Sugawa, I’ll listen to your complaints over e-mails later, so... what kind of souvenirs are nice?”

“You... is it your plan to get on my good side by getting me a souvenir?! You can’t fool me, can’t fool me!”

Sugawa continued on with things like “Don’t fuck with me! We’re breaking up! We’re breaking up!”, and before I could say a single

word in return, she hung up. All that remained was a robotic sounding tone.

“A lover’s quarrel this early in the morning? Sheesh...and it’s not even 8:00 yet? Put yourself in my shoes; you’d want to rest easy on the morning of your day off, right?”

As I tied my shoelaces in the doorway, I got a prickling feeling in my back that made me realize I was still in my pajamas. Although today is supposed to be a fun-filled day, I had this sinking feeling inside me from even before I left.

When I arrived at the station where we were meeting, I saw that everyone except me was already there.

“You’re slow-, Mister Coordinator is late-”

Takigawa waved her hand and invited me into the circle. Next to her was Nagaoka with his familiar smile, and off to each side of them stood Kitahara and Pizza-ta, who each stood there in a manner reminiscent of a bodhisattva statue.

“Sorry, I had a quarrel as I was leaving my house...sorry to make you guys wait. Good morning, everyone.”

As I bowed my head slightly, I was able to see all the faces in turn of the former year 3, class 3, D group, that I had not seen for a while. It was the first time I had seen everybody since the beginning of the new school term.

Takigawa’s lovely figure was steadily improving, and Nagaoka seemed to be growing a natural perm that resembled cotton candy. And, although he was still wearing those ill-fitting street gang-like clothes, Pizza-ta was thinner than the last time I saw him.

The meeting with everyone to plan for this trip didn’t really take place that long ago. It was about two weeks ago, or thereabouts.

In spite of that, after not having seen everyone for a little while, I got the feeling that everyone had changed just a little. At our age, for both

males and females, people grow up and change in the blink of an eye.

Was Kitahara the only person who hasn't really changed at all? Even though it seems as though her classmates have called her "Kitahara-senpai" since her first year of high school, she still has a squirrel-like figure, and wears a sour expression on her face that I can't quite read. It looks like she hasn't grown at all.

Nevertheless, in this short time, no matter how much we've appeared to have grown up; the one thing that hasn't changed is the atmosphere that we've had since middle school.

—When he's around, somehow, I feel a little more relieved.
"Hmm, since Kurosawa-dono has now arrived, let us promptly head towards Osaka! ... Ah, but before that!"

Suddenly raising his fist as if he were trying to pierce the heavens, and then quickly lowering it, Nagaoka said this:

"We are now the "former" third year, class three... and strictly speaking, Magistel-dono was not part of group D. This Dan is not the S.O.S.-Dan any more, so don't we need a new name!?"

But it appeared that it was only Kitahara and I that found this to be absolutely stupid. Takigawa and Pizza-ta were tapping their fingers to their mouths as if they had encountered a difficult math problem, and thinking earnestly about a new team name. Why were Kitahara and I always in the minority?

Clapping her hands together, Takigawa was the first to announce a candidate for our team name.

"Ah, hey, hey, how does this sound?"

"Hohoho, what is it?"

"...The Order of the Black Knights!!"

Hey, hey, Takigawa. I don't know the origins of that name, but it sounds kind of uncool... think of something more ordinary. My mind was muttering "No way", but it seems that I was once again in the minority.

"Splendid!"

Nagaoka clapped his hands, and with that one word, our team name was quickly decided. At any rate, with this naming sense... it seemed that Takigawa's senses were becoming more like Nagaoka's, down to her very core. This is alarming.

Thus, the former year 3, class 3, D group, then S.O.S.-Dan, and now Order of the Black Knights, rode the bullet train, and set out for Osaka. It's just a day in the middle of the Golden Week that followed the start of our second year in high school.

On our school trip two years ago, we only stayed for two days and one night at the place we visited – a short trip. This is the dream that a single young girl once had envisioned; and at that time, a dream that I once had, too. Two years was a long time. I'm really glad that I could finally greet this day safe and sound.

We rocked around inside trains for three hours.

After riding the bullet train, and then the subway, the Order of the Black Knights arrived at the Tenpou Mountain Harbor Village at Osaka Harbor. It was the first time we had seen this place in two years. It was just as I had envisioned; the color of the sky was even the same as two years ago – a clear day without a cloud in sight.

"Ooh-! This scenery is so nostalgic! It brings back those fleeting memories from middle school~"

Now that I think about it, the Nagaoka of two years ago also was exhilarated and frolicking around like a little child. As usual, the expressions on Kitahara and Pizza-ta's faces remained unchanged.

"Ehh~, so that's Osaka Harbor. It's my first time seeing it, so it's a fresh new experience."

Takigawa quickly linked arms with Nagaoka as soon as she stepped outside, without any hesitation. As I thought, her eyes had brightened up and were sparkling.

Now that I think about it, on the school trip's second day, when we split up into groups, Takigawa had gone with Misaki-san to visit another district. My only memories of the second day consisted of: first, how boring it was; and second, that troublesome business that Kitagawa had proposed to me.

“Now then! Where shall we visit? The aquarium? Or will it be the shopping mall?”

At any rate, Nagaoka seemed to be in high spirits.

I was quickly becoming tired due to having to sit in those uncomfortable train seats for so many hours. At last, I could breathe some fresh air. I wanted to take a short break here.

As I was thinking about that, Pizza-ta interrupted by timidly voicing his opinion to Nagaoka and Takigawa, who looked as if they were about to run off.

“Uh, um... It's noon time right now, s-so why don't we go to a restaurant...”

I agreed. Until now, I had never been grateful toward Pizza-ta.

We ate lunch at a Chinese restaurant, and then went to the aquarium. As we passed through a tunnel that ran through the tank, we saw brilliantly colored fish.

To tell the truth, a guy like me, who has no interest in the mysteries of the natural world, was kind of bored on this second trip to the aquarium. On top of that, since it was a holiday, there were a lot of other people around, and the clamor of the crowd made my ears hurt. As I thought; I was better suited to the atmosphere of a library than to a huge facility like this.

However, seeing Nagaoka and Takigawa smiling and running around happily, curiously looking at different species, one could almost stomach the boredom and the rabble of the crowd.

This is the second time that I've felt this way.

Surely, when you're on a trip, you don't really need a goal or those kind of emotions. You're always with your friends, and you'll always do something a little different each time. That's enough to make the trip interesting.

“Well then, next up is the ferris wheel! Magistel-dono, let's ride it together~”

“Of course-. Let's get a nice view of the scenery of Osaka—”

Exiting the aquarium, this lovey-dovey couple led us towards the ferris wheel, their voices full of enthusiasm.

Right behind them were us three; Kitahara and I wound up staring at Pizza-ta's sweat-soaked back as we walked in a line.

On the short path to the ferris wheel, I whispered into Kitahara's ear something I had been thinking about previously.

“Kitahara, are we riding together again?”

She shook her head like a dog trying to dry itself by shaking water off its back.

“Why the hell do I have to ride the ferris wheel with Kurosawa-kun a second time?”

“That's what I thought. I had a feeling you'd say that. Well, you're riding with Pizza-ta, then.”

“Eh?”

“You don’t want to ride with me, right? If that’s the case, then come ride together with Pizza-ta. It looks like Nagaoka and Takigawa are riding together. I’ll just wait outside.”

As I said that, Kitahara showed me the first girlish expression she had made all day. It was a really nasty look.

“Why the hell does it have to be like that?! Why can’t all three of us just ride?”

“With Pizza-ta? Three people? Don’t be ridiculous. We’d surpass the weight capacity and the ferris wheel might stop.”

“That wouldn’t happen! ...I’m being serious.”

Well, since it looks like my little speech contained more or less a few unpleasant truths, it looks like I won’t be able to talk my way out of it. It can’t be helped; it looks like my objective won’t be achieved.

“...Do you really hate Pizza-ta that much?”

After I asked that, Kitahara pondered it over, and hung her head in shame.

“It’s not as if... I hate him... But, even now, occasionally he makes me feel disgusted. At the aquarium earlier, when I was walking in front of Seki-kun, I sensed him staring at my ass. Of course, I’m thankful that he’s always kind to me, but... Ahh, he stinks like sweat... so gross...”

Ah, Pizza-ta, you rascal, now that’s something that could be called admirable. To an extent, I can sympathize with that irresistible urge. In regards to males who can perfectly understand their own conduct and set it aside, you could say they’ve got quite some nerve coming this far doing such rude things. From middle school onwards, I understood; however, I couldn’t think of Kitahara as anything but a person that had been shaken down to her very core.

I'm so glad that our conversation never reached Pizza-ta's ears. I'm already used to being abused and insulted by Sugawa, but if Takigawa did something like that to me, I'd probably never recover.

"Well, just endure it for a little while. Please, Kitahara, just ride the ferris wheel with Pizza-ta."

If I abase myself, then this time Kitahara will look at me with eyes full of blame.

"...What's with you? Why are you obsessing over Seki-kun and me?"

I was at a loss for words as to how I would explain this. In the end, I replied with this.

"Just because."

".....You're weird."

I don't know if that was a signal of her agreement or not, but soon after, Kitahara left my side and walked towards Pizza-ta.

This crazy idea that I proposed... It appears that everything got settled the way it was supposed to be, so I clapped my chest in relief.

Back in the winter of my third year of middle school, I stood in front of everybody in my class and apologized for my crimes. But, to one person, even though he was a close friend of mine, I had kept a terrible secret hidden from him.

During our school trip, I did a terrible thing to Pizza-ta.

That's why, all the more, I want to give him some good memories of this trip.

The baskets in which everyone rode steadily climbed higher. I went to a bench nearby to sit down and kill some time.

My idle hands opened and closed my cell phone a number of times.

There wasn't any indication that Sugawa had sent a reply to the e-mail I had sent her. Although I knew that it was a meaningless action, I kept checking my Mailbox, and the display kept showing "You have no new mail". It looks like I've really pissed off Sugawa this time.

It's not as if I had some ulterior motives or a guilty conscience; I had not meant to hide the fact that I was going on this trip from Sugawa. It's just that I kind of, for some reason or another, missed the chance to tell her about it.

Even though we're supposed to be dating, it's not like we keep in touch with each other every day. I don't really understand her schedule completely, either. To begin with, even though we've been going out for five months, we haven't even kissed or so much as held hands yet. If things continue on like this, I won't ever be able to ask to touch those voluptuous boobs that make me drool when I start thinking about them.

We're still at that stage.

Even so, I don't think she seems the type to get exasperated over such trivial things like that.

"I just don't understand a girl's heart..."

Those words just kind of popped out of my mouth. They sounded like something someone who is satisfied with their life would say. They made me laugh, even though I'm just a dim, introverted son of a bitch...

Before long, everyone got off the ferris wheel in groups.

"How was it? Was it fun?"

As I asked, Takigawa put on a forced smile and replied, "Uh, yeah. The view was great."

...Something's strange here.

I felt a new sense of awkwardness that was not present in the girl that was here fifteen minutes ago. Even Nagaoka, whose trademark was a smiling face, somehow had an awkward laugh. These guys were so lively before they got on the ferris wheel. I don't think they have a fear of heights or anything, either.

Looking at them now, they seemed like complete strangers compared to earlier. It looked like I'd be hearing a sigh at any moment. They looked almost as if heavy clouds were floating over the tops of their heads.

...What in the world happened on that ferris wheel?

On the other hand, Kitahara and Pizza-ta had on the same expressionless faces as if they were drawn from a painting. I wanted to ask them if they had felt any emotions at all.

On the way to our next destination, I tentatively whispered to Kitahara, asking about her thoughts. As I had expected, she bluntly answered like a certain actress, "Nothing in particular." However, I could not hide my surprise at the next words that came out of her mouth.

"...Seki-kun is moving to Kyoto next year."

"Eh?"

Somehow, I felt apprehensive, as though some strong power had firmly gripped my chest.

"...Why is he doing that?"

"Beats me. Seems like there's a famous animation company in Kyoto. He told me he's going to attend a pro training school. I don't really know the specifics. Why don't you ask him yourself?"

Incidentally, I looked at the back of Pizza-ta, who was walking a few steps in front of Kitahara and me. His back hadn't changed from the usual, and was drenched in sweat. However, from that, I couldn't really read what was in his heart.

I'm pretty sure that Nagaoka and Takigawa don't know that Pizza-ta is going to leave his hometown. If he tells anyone else, it'll have already reached my ears already, anyways.

I wonder what kind of emotion drove Pizza-ta to confess this to Kitahara.

I wanted to ask him about it, but with something this important, there's no way I could use this second hand information as a basis for the questions.

Ever since they got off the ferris wheel: Somehow, the situation between Nagaoka and Takigawa had taken a turn for the worse, and Pizza-ta was hiding an important matter in his heart with a straight face...

——From the way things are looking, it appears that this trip is not going to end up a happy trip.

As the evening continued at American Village (Amerikamura), and we made a round trip toward Dotonbori, the way Nagaoka and Takigawa behaved seemed strange. Although they were clingy as they walked around everywhere, it seemed almost like an awkward, amateurish performance. If you asked me to tell you in concrete terms what was wrong with them, I wouldn't be able to reply. However, to my eyes, I could clearly see that there was something different about those two.

On the school trip, it seems that Takigawa's group came to American Village on the second day, and they spent the day window shopping around the Horie District. Despite that, even though this time we weren't bound by restrictions like on the school trip, she still decided to come to American Village.

“There's a store that's selling pastry twists on the corner that caught my eye. Pizza-ta, want to go buy some?”

“Nah, I'll pass... I'm on a diet...”

“Oh. Pizza-ta, there’s a guy vending some black people’s hip-hop clothes there. Don’t you like that kind of stuff?”

“I’ll pass... Nowadays the brats in Japan won’t even wear BAPE and Stussy....”

Shit. Even after talking to Pizza-ta, he won’t expand the topic of conversation. And seriously, he’s the type of guy that talked about fashion... How should I put this; normally, striking up a conversation wouldn’t be a problem, but with Pizza-ta, he’s a guy that won’t really get caught up in the conversation even when you’re consciously trying to pull him in.

Having said this, Nagaoka and Takigawa had an atmosphere around them that made careless conversation difficult, and Kitahara was unsociable, as usual. What the hell should I do about this?

If Sugawa had come here, she would feel pretty much at home, and be in high spirits...

When I thought of that, I started to miss her.

As it got dark, we went to the Food Theme Park in Dotonburi and ate okonomiyaki; afterwards, we went to the hotel. It was there that I saw a rare sight.

...Nagaoka and Takigawa having an argument.

That night, we stayed in a hotel in which we had made reservations. In contrast to its cheapness as a student-oriented payment plan, it was a good hotel. The cramped and dirty rooms typical of such were nowhere to be found.

It looks like we can get a good, peaceful night’s sleep here.

Or so I thought. Even after lights out, I couldn’t really fall asleep.

Even though my mind and body were both exhausted from such an early start, the tension from thinking about the matters concerning Nagaoka and Pizza-ta kept me from falling asleep.

In the end, as we passed into the next day, I ended up not receiving a reply from Sugawa. That also kind of bothered me.

The more I thought about trying to sleep, the more I couldn't calm myself down. I ended up flopping around on top of my bed a bunch of times. At last a curtain dropped in my brain, and my senses started to fade out. At that instant, I heard a rustling sound next to me. I opened my eyes halfway to see Nagaoka getting up from his bed.

At first I thought that he was going to the toilet, so I kept quiet and was going to overlook it, but it seems that Nagaoka had a different objective in mind. He took gentle steps in order not to wake Pizza-ta and me, opened the door, and headed out into the hallway.

When I looked at the sub-display of the cell phone at my bedside, I saw that it was around 1 A.M. That rascal Nagaoka, he was faking sleep and waiting for me and Pizza-ta to fall asleep.

I was curious, so I followed Nagaoka out of the room. I didn't see his figure in the hallway, but it's likely that he went to the first floor lobby, so I'll ride the elevator and give it a try.

As I got off the elevator and rounded the corner to the entrance, for some reason I saw Kitahara there. By all rights, she should be in her room with Takigawa. However, she was wearing an ill-fitting yukata that dragged on the ground, and clinging to the wall almost as if she were a spy.

"Hey Kitahara, what are you doing ther-..."

As I spoke out and drew closer to her, she put a finger to her mouth and checked me with a short, "SHH!"

"Takigawa-san and Nagaoka-kun are in the lobby. If you speak up, they'll notice."

Eavesdropping is in bad taste. Although, isn't that what I came here to do in the first place?

“Takigawa-san suddenly got up in the middle of the night and left the room. I was curious, so I followed her,” is how Kitahara explained this situation. Good lord, our first thoughts were exactly the same.

I poked my head out from behind Kitahara to get a better peek at the lobby facing the entrance. Takigawa and Nagaoka sat facing each other at one of the corner round tables that were evenly lined up. They both had on serious faces, and for some reason looked like they were having an argument.

“What’s going on here?”

As I asked in a quiet voice, Kitahara rammed her elbow lightly into my side.

“If you take a look, you’ll understand. And, don’t get so close to me, it grosses me out.”

“Ah, uh... my bad.”

As you say, I’ll make a little distance, and concentrate on listening.

Aside from the receptionist in the entrance, there were no other signs of life in the lobby; the sounds that reached my ears was only a sudden burst of salon music. Then, I clearly heard Nagaoka and Takigawa’s conversation off in the distance.

“I... I don’t want this! I don’t want to be separated from Takigawa-dono!”

“I’ve told you so many times already, it’s not like we’re breaking up. It’s not like we’ll never see each other again...”

“B, but!”

Things aren’t looking so good.

After listening for a little while, I got a grasp on the situation.

It seems that, this afternoon on the ferris wheel, Takigawa made the same sort of confession as Pizza-ta. In other words, at the same time as her high school graduation, she was going to move to another prefecture.

Similar to Pizza-ta's desire to become an animator, Takigawa also had a dream that in the future she would be able to get a job related to fashion and accessories. To make that dream come true, it seems she is going to move somewhere where she can learn at a higher level. However, it looks like her lover Nagaoka doesn't approve.

A negotiation between love and dreams, eh? I see, now I understand a little why things felt so awkward this afternoon.

“What do you think?”

The yukata-dragging Kitahara suddenly asked this to me.

As for me... hmm.

If I was standing in their place, then it'd be easy to understand. If Sugawa had said the same thing that Takigawa did, I wouldn't have the confidence to honestly support that dream. If she went somewhere far away that I didn't know, I wouldn't just be lonely. I'd be tormented by unfathomable grief.

If we lived apart, the string that bound us together now would undoubtedly break someday. I could see her getting with another guy on a whim in a new location. I didn't have any confidence that I would be able to tie up her feelings.

“I would support Takigawa's dream. But, I also understand Nagaoka's feelings.”

——Besides, if Takigawa left, I'd be sad.

After I replied, Kitahara put on a bored-looking face and said this.

“...I agree with Takigawa-san. Serves him right. Seeing if those two break up will be quite a spectacle.”

...This girl's intense.

Does she still have some lingering feelings about being turned down, and for this guy that was stolen from her? Well, I didn't really think that was the case, but... At any rate, rather than not being honest, I couldn't think of it as any more than just a warped way of reasoning.

"I'm tired of watching, and I need to pee, so I'm going back to my room. Kurosawa-kun, be careful not to stay up too late..."

After saying that, Kitahara patted me on the shoulder and walked in the direction of the elevator. She may be sarcastic, but she was probably thinking that it was probably better not to eavesdrop excessively on our friends' private conversation any more than this.

I followed Kitahara, and shortly thereafter rode the elevator.

Although, once I returned to the room, I was constantly worrying about why Nagaoka had not come back, and couldn't really sleep.

In the end, Nagaoka and I finally ended up falling asleep around 2:30 A.M.

END OF PART ONE

Part Two

The second day of our trip, we planned to spend the day at Universal Studios Japan, and from morning until night we would enjoy ourselves completely.

Visiting this place is popular among students during school trips, and to me, it is a place with many deep memories. Of course, every one of the Order of the Black Knights has looked forward to this revisit. It wouldn't be exaggerating to call this the centerpiece of our trip this time.

However...

What's the deal with this awkward atmosphere?

Ever since what happened last night, it looks like the gears that are Nagaoka and Takigawa don't fit together well anymore; even Pizza-ta, who normally adopts an unassuming nature, seems to be bewildered by this strange turn of events taking place between those two. Kitahara has on her usual expression, in that I can't tell what she's thinking. Because I know everybody's secrets, I have really have no idea how I should interact with Nagaoka, Takigawa, and Pizza-ta.

Prior to entering through the gate, there was an atmosphere around everyone as if we had all just watched a really boring movie together. That feeling continued for a while.

“Heeey, Seki-dono! Over there's a billboard of that guy who's famous on the internet, Spider-Man~”

“Hey, hey, Kitahara-san, there's Snoopy! He's so cute!”

“It-it's a little hot... so, I'll go eat some ice cream and take a break... ah, no, I'm gonna gain weight.”

Everyone behaved as if they were enjoying themselves, but as I thought, that happiness seemed hollow somehow. The more everyone forced themselves to be happy, the more we seemed to fall apart as a group. Since it was the middle of Golden Week, the park was teeming with people enjoying themselves. Why is it that we were the only ones behaving so awkwardly?

“...This is pretty awkward.”

“It certainly is.”

The only person whom I could let my guard down around was that sarcastic Kitahara. The fact that we both knew everyone else's secrets was the only thing that we had in common.

While we ate lunch at a restaurant, thoughts swirled around in my head about what to do. Above all, what had to quickly change was

the relationship between the leaders of our group, Nagaoka and Takigawa. With the both of them acting in this manner, there was no way that everyone's engines would get fired up.

Be that as it may, the problem between these two is not something that can be resolved in just a day. That's why things are still strained between them, even though it's been a night since they've argued. Besides, this is not really something that I can intervene in.

And so, this is how things wound up. In the end, without having discovered a solution, we resumed visiting the attractions.

“Ah, look, the worker there is selling raincoats. It'd be bad if we got soaked to the skin again. Kitahara-san, let's go buy some before we get on the Jurassic Park ride!”

Takigawa...!!

Not only do you have to make things awkward, you're going to steal away my greatest pleasure too...?! Please, have some mercy...!

My wish was not granted, and the hours passed by cruelly.

If we didn't leave the park by 5:30, then we wouldn't be able to catch the bullet train home. At 4:30, we decided on a meeting place, and went off in our own ways to visit the gift shops.

I was the first person to arrive at the designated meeting spot.

I don't think that there are very many people who would be overjoyed to receive a souvenir from me. Most of the souvenirs inside this paper bag are for Sugawa. I couldn't guess what would make her happy, so choosing stuff was pretty painful. For the time being, I just filled the shopping cart with things that a person could display in their room, or things that a family could eat, and time passed in a flash.

I wonder what I could give Sugawa to make her happy. I don't feel that giving her a souvenir would be enough to return to her good graces, but that was the only thing that I could think of.

Discouraged, I sat down on a bench at the meeting spot and checked my Inbox again.

There was no reply to the e-mail I sent yesterday, nor to the one I sent today. This could very well be full-blown hate. Why the hell is it so easy to make people mad, and so difficult to make them smile? I don't understand the theory behind love, and all I do is fail.

Facing the gradually clouding sky, I sighed.
As I did, I heard a familiar, lovely voice in front of me.

“What’s troubling you, Literature Boy?”

“Takigawa...”

She grinned at me while grasping a large paper bag that her hands could barely encircle.

Takigawa took a seat next to me, and muttered “Haa~ I’m tired.” She then put her feet onto her large burden with a thud.

“I bought something for all my friends, so it ended up being tons of stuff. I’ll have them mailed later.”

“Where’s Nagaoka? Wasn’t he with you?”

“Yeah. I wanted to think something over, so I ditched him and came here first.”

“I see...”

Even though we’ve been together for two days, it feels like it’s been a while since it’s been just the two of us talking together. Normally, because she’s always with Nagaoka, we don’t have very many chances to talk face to face. Somehow, this feels pretty nostalgic.

“Is it Nagaoka you’re thinking about?”

As I asked, Takigawa appeared surprised, and said, “How did you know?”

“I could tell just by looking.”

“Looks like the secret’s out, huh?”

“That was a good time to reveal it anyways.”

After I said that, Takigawa added, “I guess I’m no match for you,” and laughed in an embarrassed manner.

Nagaoka and Takigawa are the type of people who aren’t good at lying or hiding things from other people. That’s why, regardless of what the details are, when something happened between the two of them, it’s pretty easy for outsiders to figure it out. Because of that, when I would approach them on the next day as if to rate them like CERO, in contrast to how happy they looked, I was the one whose heart would sink.

However, because of these two, I can laugh with and connect to other people. Because they are this clumsy pair that can’t just brush things aside, they are precious to me.

“Kurosawa-kun, what’s troubling you? It looked like you were sighing.”

”Does it look like something’s troubling me?”

“Seems that way. It’s about Sugawa-san, right? It’s a good time to reveal it anyways~”

“Looks like I’m no match for you.”

A smile crept out spontaneously. That melancholy mood from earlier is no longer of any concern to me.

Naturally, what resulted was that I told Takigawa about the quarrel that had taken place between Sugawa and me. How I had not told Sugawa about our trip this time until just before I left. How that had offended her. How I haven’t heard back from her. I confessed everything.

Rather than a serious discussion about love, it felt as if we were having a pleasant chat at a café. The way my true feelings came smoothly out of my mouth was almost as if I were reading them aloud from a book.

After I had finished, Takigawa thought about it for a while, put on a meek face, and said flatly:

“That was your fault, Kurosawa-kun.”

I hadn’t expected her to sympathize with me or anything, but having it asserted so clearly to me was kind of shocking in its own way.

“I-it was...?”

“That’s right. This trip may not have had anything to do with Sugawa-san, but you’ve got to tell her about important things like this beforehand. And not just the night before!”

Well, it looks like I’ve come to realize the error of my ways. Even so, I have a feeling that Sugawa’s anger is somehow different than usual. Nonetheless, although Takigawa told me that “She’s just sulking,” perhaps not receiving a single reply to my e-mails was the result of her just being childish, or maybe she was just doing it on purpose...

“It’s surely just jealousy. I think she’s probably frustrated because Kurosawa-kun is on such good terms with us, and it looks like she’s being left out.”

“Ah...”

I see.

Whenever I talked about Takigawa and the rest of them to Sugawa, she would always put on a bored looking face and only give indifferent replies like “Uh-huh,” and “Really.” It wasn’t that she didn’t have any interest in my friends, but rather that she couldn’t really break through her shell and show me her lonely side. That’s why on the morning of the day of the trip, she did something crazy like calling me and saying “Take me with you-!”

For me, if I saw Sugawa getting friendly with other guys and chatting it up, I would feel terrible. My chest would probably start to ache, and I'd feel like she was suddenly going farther and farther away from me.

I really didn't realize human relationships were so simple until it was pointed out to me. Even after reading all those books, and becoming able to make it to the third round for a newcomer's literature prize, not knowing how human relationships work really shows how much of a newbie I am and how much experience I still lack.

"Ah, geez. If it's like this, then no matter how much time passes, I won't even be able to hold hands, much less even get a kiss..."

"Uh, I'm not sure if those are related to the matter at hand..."

Leave it to Takigawa to get us out of this uncomfortable situation with her bitter smile and those words.

"Well, how should I say this? You've gotta really treasure the person that you're with."

Takigawa stood straight up as if she had made up her mind on something, stretched, and murmured as if talking to herself, "...I've got to, as well."

Her gaze was fixed on Nagaoka and the others, who were coming toward us carrying paper bags full of souvenirs. I'm a little reluctant to call it quits, but it looks like our conversation is coming to an end here.

However, I've got to say one last thanks for having listened to my story.

"Hey, Takigawa."

"What is it?"

The Takigawa that turned to face me had on a smile that was filled with a certain mystique, as if it could somehow appear in a painting. As I thought, putting on a serious face suited me more than it did her.

“Thanks for listening. You try your best, too.”

“...Yeah.”

In the end, that’s all I could say. Even knowing the circumstances surrounding Nagaoka and Takigawa, I couldn’t work out a solution. However, given enough time, I’m sure that she will be able to work out a compromise. Besides, her partner is Nagaoka. He’ll definitely work things out better than a third party like me who lets his imagination run wild. The terms “conflict” and “confrontation” really just don’t go well with those two.

That single word response was more than enough to convince me.

We wrapped up our trip by taking a commemorative photo.

Five people, standing in a line, inside the amusement park grounds. A building in the background displayed the words “Universal Studios Japan”.

This composition looks pretty familiar, doesn’t it?

To tell the truth, the reason why we planned the trip was to take this picture.

—Ever since that day as a third year middle school student, it’s been my dream.

On the bullet train home, I tried calling Sugawa from a dimly lit linking room of the train.

After some breathless moments of listening to the ring tone, the voicemail service kicked in.

I wonder where Sugawa is right now, and what she’s doing. I wonder what she thinks of me. Once I started worrying, this unease hasn’t stopped. I had no idea that not knowing her schedule well and having our communication cut off would be so painful for me. From now on,

I'm going to properly tell her about all my matters, regardless of how trivial they may be.

"Uh... Hello, it's Kurosawa. Right now, I'm on the bullet train; I think I'll be back around 8:30. I haven't eaten dinner yet. If it's all right with you, let's go somewhere together and eat. I'll be awaiting your reply."

Before I had even had time to think, I had said such a thing into the voicemail service. It didn't go as smoothly as I had liked it to, but I had done all I could.

I put my cell phone back into the pocket of my pants, and returned to where everyone was sitting.

I sat facing the third row of seats, where everyone was nodding off and snoring. Everyone had enjoyed themselves to the point of exhaustion and fallen asleep, just like on the school trip.

All except Kitahara, who remained awake, just like last time.

Although she stared out the window at the passing scenery as if she weren't talking to me, I didn't do likewise.

"...Hey, Kitahara."

"What is it?"

"Do you know Pizza-ta's cell phone e-mail address?"

Kitahara shook her head from side to side as if she were annoyed.

I know already that you don't like Pizza-ta or anything. I didn't say it with that kind of intention in mind.

"Well then, I'll send you Pizza-ta's address right now."

As I started to fiddle with my cell phone, Kitahara asked in a hesitant voice: "...Why are you doing that?"

“It’s all right if you don’t like him. Just keep in touch with him every once in a while.”

That’s my only request.

It’s unexpectedly hard to deal with being separated from an important person to you. Even just not being in contact for one or two days was enough to make me uneasy. Not to mention the anguish of living in a city far away from that important person must be a hundred to two hundred times worse.

It’s probably just me being meddlesome, but I don’t want Pizza-ta to have to go through those kind of feelings.

“...Well, if it’s only once in a while...”

“Please.”

I checked to make sure that Kitahara had received the e-mail, and then gently closed my eyes.

Oh, man. Was being filled with anxiety the result of not sleeping well...? My sense of consciousness is about to reach its limit.

“W-well then, this is where I take off. Bye bye.”

After returning to our hometown, we were all headed back to our respective homes. After walking together with everyone for a little while, the first one to say goodbye was Pizza-ta. It was the same as usual; he gave us a slight bow, and then turned his back on us.

Everyone waved their hands to send Pizza-ta off as he melted into the night.

“I’m gonna part ways with you guys here. These past two days were MEGASSA fun~! Until the next time we play again!”

“Well then, I’ll take my leave here as well. Kurosawa-dono, Kitahara-dono, thank you very much for these last two days~”

The Order of the Black Knights' member count decreased again, as Takigawa and Nagaoka left. As they departed, I swore an oath to myself that I would see them again soon. We live in the same town. I can see them anytime I want to.

However, one day, everybody will go off in their own separate ways.

Pizza-ta is moving to Kyoto next year. Speaking of the future, it's not that far away. The year after next, Takigawa is going to graduate high school, and she said she's going to move to another prefecture. One year, two years; they all pass by in the blink of an eye.

There's no guarantee that I'll be with Nagaoka and Kitahara forever, either. The day will probably come when we'll have to say to each other, "We'll meet again."

There will probably be a day when I feel a great deal more sadness as I wave my hand to send them off.

On the ferris wheel, where Pizza-ta boldly confessed to Kitahara. The out of character quarrel between Takigawa and Nagaoka over such an important matter.

——Both of these situations aren't just somebody else's problems.

"It's gonna be pretty lonely..."

I suddenly murmured that to Kitahara, who was walking slowly beside me. Unexpectedly, she was the last one to remain with me on the way home.

I felt a curious sense of nostalgia. I remembered that half a year ago, we had walked the streets at night in a similar manner, with me pushing a bicycle.

"Why are you going to be lonely? ...That's ridiculous, Kurosawa-kun."

Seeing Kitahara incline her head in thought, which made her look so much like a squirrel, I involuntarily burst out in laughter.

——Kitahara really hasn't changed, has she. Although her personality is a bit twisted, and she's prone to using abusive language more than normal people, she's showed me a really girlish side of her.

"Ah, it's nothing. See ya later."

"Okay. Bye bye."

I had to wave my hand in farewell here, as well.

At last, I was alone.

As I walked this road at night wallowing in sentimentalism, the route back home seemed even longer than usual. My head and shoulders were becoming weary from the bag that hung off my shoulder and the weight of the paper bag holding all the souvenirs that I was carrying in my hands. This short, two days + one night trip had ended up stressing my body even down to the bone.

But even stronger than the tiredness was my sense of loneliness.

These happy times will come to an end someday. A dream like today, in which we were all able to line up and take a picture together, will not be possible in the future. That fact made me feel even more lonely than usual.

The members of The Order of the Black Knights had become true, irreplaceable friends to a loser like me. I didn't even want to think of becoming separated from them.

In the end, I didn't receive a reply to the message I left on Sugawa's voicemail service. At first I thought nothing of it, but before I knew it, my un-ringing phone had become pretty heart-wrenching. I'm really such a loser...

As I pondered that while walking along, something entered my field of vision and called out, which brought me to a halt.

“In just two days, your face has become pretty damn pathetic, hasn’t it? You masturbating son of a bitch!”

Relieved, I turned around. It wasn’t just that I missed it. It was the harsh voice I had been waiting and waiting for. On top of a fence that separated the park from the road, this girl, swinging her pale white legs back and forth sensually was...

“Sugawa!”

“The hell are you walking all slowly for?! You idiot, you’re freaking slow. I thought I was going to have to wait forever!”

I’ve missed that blunt manner so much. I somehow felt happy, and like my heart was about to collapse. The boatload of questions I wanted to ask her, like about why she was here, all flew out the window the moment I saw her.

In the middle of that dimly lit street, Sugawa was illuminated by a streetlight, and it seemed to my eyes like it was a hole cut out of the surrounding darkness.

Sugawa hopped off the fence she was sitting on, with her hands stuck in the pockets of her jacket; a small smile appeared on her mouth.

“Welcome home.”

I’m back.

Because Sugawa said that she was hungry, we proceeded to go eat dinner. After some discussion, we decided on a ramen cart nearby. Or rather, it was her persistently repeating “The cart is fine, the cart is fine” and pushing me. It always turns out like this. Even if I had invited her to a restaurant with a nice atmosphere, she’d probably be too embarrassed to say anything. That’s also pretty typical of her.

It seemed that she wasn’t really waiting in the park with the intent to surprise me. Sugawa explained, “Even if other people were coming

to pick you up, I was just bored.” Even so, it would have been nice if she could have at least sent me an e-mail.

As we sat together at the plain counter of the cart waiting for our ramen order to be finished, we talked together while being immersed in steam.

“I’m sorry, it was my fault. From now on, I’ll tell you about important things beforehand.”

“Nah, I was being childish. I’m not mad anymore.”

Sugawa continued on by saying that, turning her eyes away from me, and staring down at the wooden grain of the table.

“I g-guess it looks like I was sulking a bit. But... well... umm... err, I guess I overdid it a little.”

Amazing. It looks like Takigawa hit the bulls-eye with her prediction. In contrast to how they appear, it looks like they can both connect on this issue since they’re both girls, after all.

“B-but more importantly!”

With a faint blush appearing on her face, Sugawa changed the topic of conversation. She asked me how my trip was. Putting it honestly, “A lot of stuff happened, but it was fun,” was how it turned out.

“Ah, right. I bought a whole ton of souvenirs.”

“...what, I didn’t ask you about that!”

“All the stuff inside this paper bag is for you.”

Saying thus, I handed the bag over to Sugawa right then. A stuffed animal, candies, and all kinds of stuff made the paper bag bulge in strange places. That was the result of all my labors. It’d be nice if she accepted it happily.

Opening the bag and looking inside, Sugawa frowned.

“Uwah, what the hell is this poorly made stuffed animal?! Freakin’ gross! And of all things, you had to get ET?! What kind of sense do you have... this isn’t supposed to be a mystery grab bag, you know. You totally bought too much!”

What severe criticism. I knew it was coming, but my chest still hurt a little bit. However...

“But, thanks.”

With that one word, everything became all right.

After the conversation about souvenirs, we both ate ramen. As the conversation become more lively, before I knew it, my ramen had become soggy. However, this ramen that I was able to eat together with Sugawa was more delicious than any gourmet food you could get in Osaka.

The two of us continued on the road towards home.

Before I knew it, I wasn’t able to feel the tiredness in my shoulders. Maybe it’s because I have a full stomach and my strength has returned... nah, I can’t say something stupid like that. It’s all because of the girl walking next to me.

After resolving our prior argument and talking about souvenirs, we both became somewhat taciturn. I silently walked in the wrong direction. Sugawa smoked a cigarette in a bored manner, as usual.

Along the way, I brought up something that I had thought about during our conversation at the cart.

“Let’s go on a trip during summer vacation.”

“Eh? T-the two of us?”

Sugawa’s voice raised and sounded a bit out of control. I don’t think you need to be THAT surprised.

Treasuring the person that you're with... that's what Takigawa had said to me, right? It was just as she had said. After this, I'm not sure what will happen between me and Sugawa.

That's why I've got to make this chance now.

That dream Takigawa drew in middle school finally came true two years later. I've got to think of Sugawa in the same way; in that "someday" we can make that kind of memory.

What I learned from this trip was that one day everybody will live apart from each other; something like that may not be possible again. This time we were lucky, and able to take the picture, but if someone splits off, we will never be able to recreate that scene from the dream. Someday, that time will come.

Now might be the only moment that we can realize our adolescent dreams in this way. The day will come when memories that we've built up during our childhood will one day turn into dust and blow away in the wind. But you see, Sugawa. I want to take you out with me into the world after we've become adults.

I want to make memories together with you continuing onward from our adolescent years.

When I just think of the concept of "someday"... I know that whatever the future holds, we can continue on together.

"Let's make some good memories. Until then, save up some money, okay?"

"A-all right... wait, I haven't even given you a response yet! Don't just decide things like that on your own!"

I got lightly kicked in the lower leg. She's violent as ever.

After that, we both took out our hands, and held hands on the way back.

Five months of perseverance. This was the first time I had held Sugawa's hand; it was small, and soft.

"So this is how a girl's hand feels."

"Shut up...shut up and walk!"

Being a little embarrassed, our conversation had died down to an even greater extent than earlier. But thanks to this, my number of great memories increased.

These memories will surely continue on into the future.

THE END